

TO BRISBANE FROM MELBOURNE

Brisbane is Uncle Frank and Auntie Amy.
They came, she as small and grey and soft as a pigeon;
he brown-skinned, white-suited, talking picture slang.
How are yer batting? Me? Well, I had a couple of dry
creekbeds to cross back there and a stretch of stony road.
He sent me birthday tickets in the Queensland Golden Casket,
flimsy, with long affectionate letters in fine handwriting,
always apologising for this little gift. Once I won ten pounds.

When he came, wifed or alone, our house was gay.
He sat inside a chintzy chair. I watched a little mound
of ash grow below the right-hand arm. My fastidious mother,
I observed, did not rebuke him with an ash tray.
Then Auntie Amy's brothers, they came too and there was
relaxation of all rules, concerns,
for pleasure in good company.

Later, he came with cancer, painless but predicted deadly.
A knighted surgeon cut him about. My godfather!
He lay in the Mercy Hospital many weeks,
making the nuns laugh, begging us not to make him laugh
it hurt so much. Going North again, he died in agony.

At 18 & 19, I went to his house, inhabited by her,
a daughter, son, brass, ebony elephants and more
than memories. They lived in his discarnate presence.
We sat in the verandah, nudged by frangipani.
Auntie Amy liked to pop a chocolate in her mouth
till diabetes put its foot down on her thigh with needles
she had learnt to give herself. Still, her other drawers
were full of ribbons, lengths of satin, velvet,
to be tied around the waist for dancing,
and writing paper boxed. She couldn't resist it.
She smiled, planned enjoyment for the young, hummed
around the dressing, waved goodbye and went to bed.

Oh, if Uncle Frank had lived, would my father have forgotten
how to smile on pleasure? This man was his great, his best,
perhaps his only friend.

1974

HELEN HORTON

PISONIA FOREST

Go quietly in the pisonia forest
the noddies are nesting,
sitting out the long bright days
wrapped in the green shade of their own patience
and the ritual changeover of their
mirror-patterned seasonal love.

Tread softly over pisonia roots
the shearwaters are nesting.
All night the dark is full of their calling
as if they had caught the vast expanse
of windswept ocean in their bills and brought it here
to spill it out in lost cries
on the sandy goal of their summer compulsion.

Go gently in the pisonia forest,
the landrails have nested
and tucked their tiny darkling chicks
into cups of shadows left untidily under boughs
fallen from the past.

Stand still awhile in the pisonia forest,
for here the air is soft
and the enfolding trees contain their own fulfilment
in the stillness of centuries.
The white glare of the parading beach
is another world away.